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Efforts aimed at boosting tree cover

\$25 coupons to be made available to county residents

by Margie Hyslop | Staff Writer

As Earth Day and Arbor Day arrive today and Friday, local planning officials are preparing to offer county residents incentives to help restore the area's declining tree cover.

A new program, called Leaves for Neighborhoods, will make \$25 coupons available to purchase a shade tree valued at \$75 or more from a participating nursery.

Planners say the county has been losing tree cover to infill and denser development for decades, as trees were cut to make room for houses. Also, development has interfered with the root systems of trees and likely caused many to die early, they say.

Meanwhile, the County Council and the Department of Environmental Protection are working toward a tree preservation ordinance and looking at zoning changes that could stem or reverse the pattern of tree losses in residential areas.

Environmentalists say trees help prevent erosion and filter storm-water runoff to protect streams and drinking water. They also absorb carbon dioxide to improve air quality.

"Trees are vitally important to protecting what we have, and adding to tree cover is an important goal," said Stan Edwards, Montgomery's chief of environmental policy and compliance.

Trees also can lower home heating and cooling costs by offering shade in summer and admitting light and warmth in winter or by blocking wind.

County forest conservation laws, which apply mainly to land parcels of nearly an acre or larger, "don't really cover suburban trees," said Katherine Nelson, an environmental planner and coordinator for the planning department.

"Even quantifying [the number of trees in residential neighborhoods] has been hard to do," Nelson said, but "it's been a significant loss, especially as areas developed in the early [1950s] were being redeveloped."

In Montgomery Hills, one of the last stands of trees — which is classified as a forest but really is more like a large grove — was lost when the land, which had been subdivided before the forest conservation law was enacted, was finally built on, Nelson noted.

The Department of Environmental Protection is working on estimating the coverage and benefits provided by trees in the county's residential neighborhoods and expects to complete that project by the end of the year, Edwards said.

Meanwhile, DEP is working with council members Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park and Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac on a proposal to expand the number of trees protected by county law,

said Elrich's chief of staff Dale Tibbitts.

Although saving and increasing the number of suburban trees is valuable, officials say the importance of the larger forests can't be overestimated. They offer a rich environment, with layers of understory such as shrubs and small plants that provide more shelter and food than does a home's yard.

Currently, forest trees cover about 29 percent of the county, planners said. In 1973, forest cover was estimated at 45 percent.

While conserving forests might be daunting, officials believe they can make a difference in the suburban tree cover with the coupon program.

The Leaves for Neighborhoods campaign will be paid for with money in the Montgomery County Forest Conservation Fund, which requires reforestation or fees in many cases when construction leads to cutting trees.

The coupons will be valid only on the purchase of native and drought-resistant trees to minimize the need for watering and maximize environmental gains.

Details of the tree purchase program are being finalized and will be available, along with a list of the eligible species, on the planning department's Web site at www.montgomeryplanning.org/environment/forest, said Valerie Berton, spokeswoman for the department.